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## Rural people get why Old Miakka residents fight to preserve lifestyle

To understand why longtime residents of Old Miakka like Becky Ayech have been fighting so hard to retain their rural lifestyle, it probably helps to have grown up “in the sticks,” as I did in rural Michigan, 10 miles from the nearest population center.

My siblings and I learned about birth watching the barn cat deliver kittens in the hayloft, death when our beloved Shetland pony, Popcorn, was struck by lightning, and the facts of life when the stallion we boarded mounted our mare in heat.

Eating cherry tomatoes still warm from the sun connected us to our source of food; grooming our 4-H animals taught us to care for something larger than ourselves. The mile walk to the school bus stop

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ingrained the value of both exercise and meditative thought. Living far from any store bred thrift, ingenuity and self-reliance.

“Rural people will do anything not to drive to town – change a recipe, borrow a tool, do without,” says Ayech, president of the Miakka Community Club, sounding just like my frugal mother. “Anything, but please don’t make me drive to town!”

It’s a way of life that instills an appreciation for hard truths and simple pleasures. You tend to come away with a commitment to foundational values that will serve you well, even if you leave for bigger cities and brighter lights, as I did, escaping to college in New York City like any country rube bent on finding more excitement.

Ayech has lived that lifestyle for all but the two years she spent in Paris as a nanny at 25. She grew up in rural southern Indiana near New Albany (it sounds like “knob knee” when she says it), but won’t go back now, even to visit her brothers, because “to see the farmland changed into cookie cutter subdivisions ... I just can’t look at it.”

Ayech has lived in Old Miakka for 42 years, and much of that time she’s been fighting to preserve the lifestyle she and her husband found when they arrived. She has attended every charrette, spoken at every meeting and participated in every study that’s been held in the past two decades as the county’s boundary for urban development has crept steadily eastward toward the 175-year-old enclave.

For the past two years, she’s led the charge to reject the increased density of the “hamlet” form of development proposed in the Sarasota 2050 land-use plan for 6,000 acres of pasture land north of Fruitville Road.

The comprehensive plan amendment she initiated would instead preserve Old Miakka as a “rural heritage” area, freezing maximum residential density at one home per five acres and ruling out any commercial uses except agricultural ones.

It’s a battle Ayech and her neighbors thought they’d won in 2006, when the county spent \$30,000 to create the Old Miakka Neighborhood Plan. Its 38 pages underscore the significance of the area’s history, architectural and archaeological sites, rural atmosphere and scenic roads and validate residents’ foremost desire: to preserve the area’s delicate and unspoiled balance.

“There is a strong sense of place here, a rural identity linking humans and land,” the plan says. “The density of the land use must be meticulously mindful of such characteristics and avoid being at odds with the rural con-

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## Becky Ayech

President, Miakka Community Club

text of the community and realize the strain that land use puts on the area’s natural resources, most importantly, water ... The main concern is preserving this character well into the future.”

When that plan was accepted by the county in 2007, Ayech says she and her neighbors “went home happy, happy ... Finally we felt protected.”

But something shifted between then and 2015, when residents were informed that “accepting” the plan was not the same as “adopting” it. Since then, Ayech says, the disconnect between “urban mentality and rural reality” – brought in part by changes in district lines that resulted in elected officials coming from urban centers or the ranks of ranchers with vast property (and thus development) interests – has only continued to grow.

“When you stopped having people who knew the lifestyle on your elected or even appointed boards, people who had not a clue about you ... that’s when things really began to change.”

Eventually Ayech decided that instead of fighting every development challenge, she’d seek a more permanent resolution through the comprehensive plan amendment BOCC members will recommend for adoption or rejection on Sept. 23. She is optimistic it will prevail.

“I really do feel we’ll be able to get at least three of the commissioners to see this in the light it should be seen,” she said. “They will see it as a covenant with the community.”

And if they don’t?

“We’ll gather more signatures and go at it again,” she says. “Isn’t that what the developers do? I have no intention of leaving, and I have no intention of letting them destroy this community.”

Last year I returned to Michigan, where I no longer have relatives, to see an elderly friend. She lives in a model home on a small lot in a subdivision across the street from the farm my family owned. The farm itself has been sculpted into slightly larger lots with showy multi-story homes on paved driveways connected by broad sidewalks.

As my golden years approach, I’ve dreamed of returning to the rural lifestyle of my youth. It’s too late for me to go home again. But it’s not too late for Old Miakka.